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Posted on Tue, Aug. 13, 2002

The Mercury News

Explosion levels home in Los Angeles, injures 10

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - A powerful explosion leveled one home and damaged 20 others Tuesday, scattering debris over adjacent blocks and injuring 10 people in Torrance, a seaside suburb south of Los Angeles, fire officials said.

Police said the 5:45 a.m. PDT (8:45 a.m. EDT) blast destroyed the home, which had been tented for fumigation, and blew out windows and glass doors across a several-blocks-wide area.

No one was inside the building when the explosion took place, authorities said. But 10 people in nearby homes were treated for mostly minor injuries, a Torrance fire department spokesman said.

At least 20 other homes sustained significant damage, according to Torrance Mayor Dan Walker. "We are thankful there appears to be no loss of life," Walker said.

Authorities evacuated residents from homes nearest the explosion's center and police went door-to-door to check on the welfare of residents who had not been seen since the blast.

Utilities inspectors and hazardous materials teams were on the scene trying to determine the cause of the explosion, which was felt more than 15 miles (24 km) away.

A spokesman for The Gas Co. said natural gas lines to the home apparently had not been shut off before it was fumigated for termites.

Gas meters are normally turned off before homes are sealed in plastic tarps that are pumped full of pesticide gases, the gas company spokesman said.



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Gas possible cause of home explosion

TORRANCE, California (CNN) --Investigators looking into the explosion of a vacant home Tuesday said a gas valve left open may have contributed to the early morning blast.

The house had been tented for fumigation, and "generally speaking, the standard procedure is that the company doing the fumigation should turn the gas off," said Peter Hidalgo, a spokesman for The Gas Co. "We did discover ... once we gained access to where the natural gas meter was, that it was left in the 'on' position.

"At this time we cannot confirm that this was a natural gas incident. ... We don't know if there are any other factors involved."

Dennis Hansen, Torrance Fire Department operations specialist, said that "somehow there was an accumulation of natural gas in the house."

"The chemical used for fumigation is not explosive or flammable," he said. "When (the house) is tented, it's completely sealed. The speculation is that a natural gas leak caught an ignition source and blew."

The blast occurred at 5:47 a.m. (8:47 EDT), leveling the house, causing damage to at least 20 others and injuring 10 people.

All the injuries were minor; five people were taken to hospitals for treatment of cuts, strains and bruises, said Tad Friedman, a Torrance Fire Department spokesman.

Emergency personnel were going door-to-door Tuesday assessing damage, Hansen said.

"The people are being moved to a central site to stay in while their homes are being evaluated," he said.

The house was on Tom Lee Avenue, which borders the city of Redondo Beach. Some of the damaged houses were in Redondo Beach, the fire official said.

Torrance is about 30 miles south of Los Angeles.

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Friday, August 16, 2002

Local News

Blast: 10 people injured, 115 homes damaged as tented house explodes

By Larry Altman and Ian Gregor

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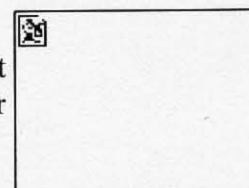
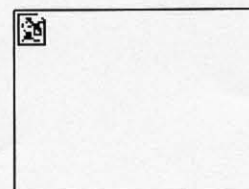
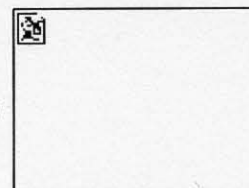
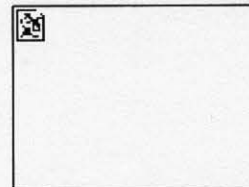
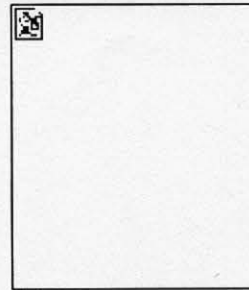
A Torrance home tented for fumigation filled with natural gas and exploded into a thunderous ball early Tuesday, sending a shock wave through two cities, damaging at least 115 homes, blowing out windows and injuring 10 people.

The blast — which one expert said was equivalent to 200 to 400 sticks of dynamite — leveled the three-bedroom, two-bathroom residence, leaving only a snapped brick chimney and concrete porch standing amid a pile of wood, mattresses, crumpled furniture and stucco.

The homeowners, Robert and Helen Mimura, were away and never appeared at the scene.

The explosion dislodged Ralph Losorelli's home next door from its foundation, cracked walls, shattered car windows, and blew out garage doors and windows throughout the 20900 block of Tomlee Avenue. A storm of glass flew into homes and insulation showered the street.

"It sounded like a meteor was hitting the Earth," said Stephanie Hofmann, who lives down the street.



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Stephanie Hofmann, who lives down the street.

Stucco, wood and glass covered the cul-de-sac just off Torrance Boulevard and Prospect Avenue, and fire roared from a sheared natural gas line until crews capped it at 7:45 a.m. Firefighters said 33 homes in Torrance were damaged, along with 82 in Redondo Beach on nearby streets.

Torrance fire investigators said the blast resulted from natural gas leaking inside the tented house for nearly 15 hours. Torrance fire spokesman Tad Friedman said the gas accumulated from the time the one-story house was tented at 3 p.m. Monday, filling the home from the attic down.

At 5:45 a.m. Tuesday, something touched off the blast. Friedman said it could have been anything from the fans working to move the fumigant inside the residence to "something as innocuous as a refrigerator motor."

Investigators planned to question residents who heard hissing prior to the blast.

Diane Evans, who lives across the street from the Mimuras' home, said she heard the sound when she arrived home at 4:30 p.m. Monday and noticed the house was tented. The hissing, she said, sounded as if "you are pumping something into something."

Evans heard it again later when she watered the front lawn at 10 p.m., but thought it was the sound of chemicals being pushed through the home.

"I thought that was a little odd," she said. "I don't know if what I heard was the gas line. You could hear a constant hissing sound. I actually stood there. I stood there and thought, 'Is that right?'"

Evans and her two boys were staying in an extended stay hotel after their house was red-tagged and deemed unlivable. Ceilings in two rooms fell in and the garage door disappeared.

"I don't even know where it ended up," she said.

Why the gas leaked into the 1,676-square-foot house remained under investigation. At first, gas company crews found pipes that pointed blame at the

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fumigators — Network Fumigation and Extermination Co. in Anaheim. Dennis Lord, a Southern California Gas Co. spokesman, said a gas shut-off valve was in the “on” position.

But later in the day, gas company workers found a second valve in the rubble that had been installed on the gas meter in the “off” position. That should have kept gas from spewing into the home during the tenting process, Lord said.

“Apparently the gas was off to the house, which confuses the story,” Lord said. “Where did the explosion come from and why?”

The valves and pipes were sent to a laboratory for an examination to determine if they leaked from another point, whether they were corroded, vandalized or damaged during the tent installation, including whether someone stood on them, Lord said.

Gas still was flowing to the regulator, which likely was covered by the tent, Lord said. Bomb-sniffing dogs from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department did not detect anything suspicious when they combed through the debris, Friedman said, adding the fumigant used, sulfuryl fluoride, is not flammable.

The 5:45 a.m. explosion could be felt as far away as San Pedro and West Los Angeles. But on Tomlee, residents one-by-one described being awakened by what felt like a bombing, a plane crash or earthquake.

“We thought it was a terrorist attack on our house,” said Nancy Ozolins, who lives across the street from the Mimuras. Ozolins' solid oak door blew out, along with every window and skylight in the house.

“My TV shot across the room,” she said. “It was the biggest explosion. It's so horrible.”

Torrance firefighter Friedman said it was amazing no one was seriously hurt. Most of the injured suffered cuts and scratches, primarily caused by running barefoot over glass as they fled their homes. Five people required hospitalization, including the next-door neighbors.

Family members said the husband suffered from the shock and his wife suffered back pains.

"We're totally blessed that there has been no loss of life," Torrance Mayor Dan Walker said. "When looking at the site, it's very difficult to believe that."

Some 40 residents were forced to evacuate from their Torrance homes and were kept away until building inspectors could determine whether their residences were safe to occupy. Besides the Mimuras' flattened home, the Losorelli house was red-tagged next door.

The American Red Cross opened a shelter at Torrance's West High School, where food, blankets and cots were made available, but few people made use of it.

Of the injured, five were hospitalized for treatment, including the Losorellis. No injuries were considered serious, and primarily involved cuts and scratches, Friedman said.

Natalie Reed, a 19-year-old Torrance woman who survived a boat crash on the Colorado River that killed two friends in March, walked with her left foot bandaged to cover cuts from glass.

"Our whole house is destroyed," she said. "My whole room is like a shambles."

Ted Hofmann, son of Lawndale Mayor Harold Hofmann, helped the Losorellis escape from their home. Ted Hofmann was treated for an eye injury at Little Company of Mary Hospital in Torrance.

"When you see the trash and particles, and the many things thrown as far away as that explosion put them, you think it's a miracle no one lost their life," Harold Hofmann said.

Throughout the morning, residents who experienced the blast commiserated and described their ordeals to each other and a flurry of reporters. Some stood in pajamas and others barefoot.

The scene looked like a war zone. On the two-story house next door to the destroyed structure, the stucco was bulged in some places and entirely ripped away in others, exposing the underlying chicken wire.

The force of the blast launched a pair of 2-by-4s into the home's south wall, where they remained stuck hours later like enormous wooden javelins. On the other side of the home, metal window frames bent inward as the blast apparently sucked the air from the house.

Windows blew out of homes on a hillside above and to the west of Tomlee, and knocked tiles from rooftops.

Window frames splintered and car windows were laced with spider-web cracks. A piece of wood stuck into pickup truck's tire. Torrance city workers had placed yellow "restricted use" placards on some badly damaged homes and red tape around the entrance of one possibly destroyed home.

Clips that had held the tent onto the home lay on a front lawns dozens of yards from the destroyed home.

"I was a kid born in 1942. I used to play in bombed out buildings in England," said John Williams, who lives across the street from the explosion. "It reminded me of there."

Williams said he had been sending computer messages to his brother in England and checking the scores for his Yorkshire soccer team, when the blast blew his front door off the hinges. Glass flew everywhere, along with his back door and garage door. Portions of the ceiling caved in.

The explosion awakened his son, David, 16, who saw the flash through his window.

"I rolled over as hard as I could," he said. "The ceiling almost hit me."

Williams' wife, Cindy, described the Mimuras as "lovely people."

"They are very pleasant," she said. "I feel bad for them because they lost everything. It's something that really shouldn't have happened."

Sheriff's Department Sgt. Larry Crookshanks, a 13-year member of the sheriff's bomb squad, said the

wave coming from such an explosion can be intense.

"The energy alone can kill you," he said. "That was one devil of an explosion."

State law requires fumigators to turn off the natural gas to a structure before they begin pumping in sulfuryl fluoride poison gas, known as Vikane, said Melinda Al-Alami, a deputy with the environmental protection bureau of the Los Angeles County Department of Agricultural Commissioner/Weights and Measures. If natural gas seeps into a shuttered house, the slightest spark from static electricity or even a refrigerator turning on could cause an explosion, she said.

"It's standard operating procedure — it has to be turned off," Al-Alami said, standing on a carpet of splintered wood, shingle, tar paper and insulation across the street from the demolished house. Al-Alami said one or two explosions occur in the fumigation process a year, but nothing like what happened to the Mimura home.

"I've never seen anything like this in my life," she said. "I think every fumigator should be sent to this property to look at it and see how bad it is. We just don't make rules and regulations for no reason."

Al-Alami said once she completed her reports, the case would be presented to county authorities to determine if anyone is to blame.

Traci Jai Isaacs contributed to this article.

Find out more: The general information line for residents affected by the explosion is 310-618-2320 or 310-618-2321.

Publish Date: 08/14/02

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